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INSIGHT

Power with purpose

Robert Lawrence Kuhn explains why abolishing presidential term limits may well be good for China

To interview delegates and officials at the annual National People's Congress in Beijing, interspersed with being interviewed in the international media about China abolishing term limits for its president, is to inhabit parallel universes.

Delegates and officials focus on clusters of issues from controlling financial risk and reducing pollution to scientific innovation and business stimulation, plus enhancing and institutionalising China's anti-corruption campaign with a powerful National Supervision Commission. The international media, no surprise, focus on the constitutional amendment ending term limits, assuming President Xi Jinping will now serve in a for-life dictatorship, reminiscent of Mao's China, the Soviet Union, the Kim family in North Korea and some African countries.

It is no challenge to explain why abolishing term limits is bad for China – dependency on one human being who is not omniscient but is hostage to fortune, fewer and weaker checks and balances, forced conformity in a complex society with no easy answers, etc. The system begins stronger in that hard choices can be made and consistency maintained, but it could become brittle in that officials are more wary and may say things they do not believe.

It is a challenge to explain why abolishing term limits is good for China, so that's what I will do.

First, some background. There are three separate issues being conflated: the significance of ending term limits, the intended consequences and the unintended consequences. Though terminating the two-term limit for China's presidency captures headlines, it is more the symbolic, final step ratifying Xi's near-absolute power than the big breakthrough itself.

Xi's prior designation as "core" of the Communist Party in October 2016 and the inscribing of "Xi Jinping Thought..." into the party constitution in October 2017 were more meaningful.

Moreover, the Politburo Standing Committee, the highest authoritative body in China, unambiguously supports Xi. China watchers see the front page of *People's Daily* – published the day after the new Standing Committee marched out on stage – which featured Xi's photo on top, many times larger than the smaller, subservient photo of all seven members lined up on the bottom.

All this reconfirms that, in a system where the party controls the state – especially where the party is Marxist and ideology is its basis for being – Xi, as core of the party, with his name inscribed in the constitutions of party and state as the contemporary arbiter of Marxism, will be the uncontested, overarching leader of China for the rest of his sentient life.

For intended consequences, the official line is that the purpose is national cohesion brought about when the three top leadership positions – general secretary of the party, chairman of the Central Military Commission and president of the republic – are aligned temporally and held by a single person.

This makes sense, but as a primary, proximal motivation, it is not entirely persuasive. The current structure has existed for decades without outcry or angst (not to mention that the three positions could be unified by installing term limits on the other two).

The "new era", marked by economic, social and global complexities, is said to require firm and consistent leadership, making moot inner party struggles and even mitigating political gossip, facilitating focus on the tasks of governance and development. Specifically, because advancing

reform has become more difficult, with entrenched interest groups resisting change, the message must now go forth that all must get with the programme, because you can't outwit or outwait Xi.

Because, it is said that only Xi has the vision, experience, competence and character to bring about "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people", especially from 2020 to 2035 and ultimately to 2050 – bringing China to global centre stage – Xi's unimpeded leadership is deemed essential. China cannot afford "downtime" to accommodate a change of leadership, and after Xi's success at the 19th National Party Congress came the time to make clear that he will call the shots for the foreseeable future.

Some argue that doing away with term limits shows the superiority of the Chinese system as it allows flexibility in matching leadership to requirements (though what national leader, when extending his reach, has not claimed "current requirements" as justification?).

The party-run *Global Times* stated that ending term limits does not mean China has reverted to president-for-life tenure. (But who can deny that however long Xi holds the top positions seems largely up to him?)

As for the unintended consequences, the almost unanimous, disparaging foreign reaction – other than US President Donald Trump's – did not burnish China's international image.

More worrisome would be a reluctance by officials to offer constructive opposing views on central policies.

By stressing term limits, the international media misses fundamental changes going on in China – this year, innovation, streamlining of government, facilitation of business (cutting bureaucracy and reducing taxes), rural revitalisation and rural land

reform. The 13th National People's Congress shows how the grand vision and mission of the 19th National Party Congress is translated into specific strategies and policies. If one sees only term limits, one cannot visualise the big picture.

As for Xi maintaining the presidency perpetually, it doesn't actually matter much – this is the deep insight of how China's party-state system works. Xi as core of the party and "Xi Jinping Thought..." as the party's (and now the state's) guiding principle means that Xi can transfer titular party leadership and/or the presidency to others and still maintain his overarching power. It may well be that, after serving two or even three more terms, rather than trying to find and install another leader like himself, he will move to bring about true democracy within the party.

Here's the best case. Xi will not be leader-for-life, but leader long enough to bring about China's national rejuvenation and establish a Chinese kind of democratic norms. Could Xi continue until around 2035, when China plans to have "basically" achieved full modernisation, heading towards, by mid-century, 2050, a "great modern socialist country"?

Many expect this experiment to end badly for China. It is indeed an experiment but its end is not set. It may be a race between achieving Xi's grand vision and some untoward perturbation that could cause fracture.

All factors considered, I am not saying abolishing term limits is absolutely good for China. I am saying it may be good – because of China's special conditions and Xi's special capabilities – but if it is good, it's just for this once, and it's just for so long. That's the best case. I'm rooting for Xi.

Robert Lawrence Kuhn is a public intellectual, international corporate strategist and investment banker, and China expert/commentator. He is the author of *How China's Leaders Think*.

Private clubs deserve 'cushy' rental deals

Edith Terry says private recreational clubs are part of Hong Kong's heritage and have contributed to nurturing less popular sports, as well as a unique hybrid culture

In 1964, a young German, fresh off the plane at his first job, went in search of a social group. He found a home away from home in Hong Kong's oldest private recreational club, newly relocated from a prime location on Victoria Harbour, where City Hall is today, to a modest flagstone boathouse beneath Island Road on Hong Kong's south side. Fifty-five years later, Frank Pfeiffer, a Zen Buddhist and mountain climber, is still an active member of the Victoria Recreation Club, established in 1849. He has watched it ring the changes from Hong Kong's colonial society in the 1960s, when it had only two Chinese members and no female members, to the hybrid institution it is today, under its first Hong Kong Chinese chairman, Wu Kam Shing.

Its membership is a spectrum of Hong Kong's diverse and athletically minded middle class. There is the Hong Kong Chinese court reporter who visits the club in Deep Water Bay every morning at 6am on her way from home in Ap Lei Chau to her workplace in Sha Tin. There are her fellow swimmers, many elderly, who swim out to the buoys, rain or shine, hot or cold, every day. Some 100-150 "paddlers" use the club as a base for outrigger canoeing, dragon boating and paddle boarding. Some of the sports were unknown to Hong Kong before the club nurtured them, others, like dragon boating, are deeply traditional.

In the current debate over the future of the 67 private recreational clubs that pay minimal rents to the government, history has been swept aside. True, they were designed on a colonial template, in which the diverse ethnic groups were given separate retreats. Membership at the pinnacle clubs was reserved primarily for the British. For other ethnic groups, there was a Chinese Recreation Club, a Club de Recreio, a Filipino Club, an Indian Recreation Club, and so on.

Hong Kong's colonial rulers reviewed the lease system for the private clubs in 1968 and 1979, and in the run-up to the handover in 1997 when leases were restricted to 15-year terms. At the handover, a number of leases were extended to ensure a so-called smooth transition. The sceptic would argue that this was a dodge, and indeed, in 2011, during the first post-1997 review of private recreational leases by the Legislative Council, most of the clubs seemed oblivious to public concerns as well as new requirements for "opening up"

The government argued that subsidies were needed because use of land for sports and recreation would never trump commercial utilisation

to schools and community organisations. Following the last well-publicised review in 2013 and the current investigation seeking new venues for public housing, they are no longer complacent.

Should the private clubs have got their cushy rental deals in the first place? At the time of the reviews 50 years ago, the government argued that subsidies were needed because use of land for sports and recreation would never trump commercial utilisation. What was true then is even more so today. The high cost of land in Hong Kong is a drag on innovation and creativity. The existence of the private recreational clubs means it has been less of a drag on sports.

Most of the clubs with government leases are framed around core sports – golf, tennis, horse racing, swimming, sailing and rowing, to name a few. Hong Kong athletes whose development was supported by these clubs have gone to the Olympics and other international competitions. In the 1940s, the Victoria Recreation Club was the driving force behind Hong Kong's participation in the International Olympic Committee and the Hong Kong Sports Federation.

Public pressure on the clubs to forge community ties and contribute to Hong Kong through "opening up" schemes is appropriate – but not the pressure to convert their land to high-rise estates. The loss is not only to the core sports they represent but also to their unique DNA, which is the foundation of Hong Kong – diverse, cosmopolitan and adventurous. If you want to look for a Hong Kong that is not just about money, one place to look is here.

Edith Terry is the honorary secretary of the Victoria Recreation Club. She writes in a personal capacity



Stand-up paddlers participate in an event held at the Victoria Recreation Club. Photo: Jonathan Wong

Many expect this experiment to end badly for China. It is indeed an experiment but its end is not set



What the Western belt and road sceptics are missing

Wenshan Jia says there are opportunities for the whole world to benefit from China's initiative

China's "Belt and Road Initiative" is an original plan to carry out a new type of "collaborative globalisation" above and beyond US-led type. It was proposed five years ago by President Xi Jinping after the tapering off of US-led globalisation in 2008.

Xi offered three principles: mutual consultation, joint construction and shared benefits. China has since then fully executed 101 agreements with 86 countries, and total investment in the 24 countries along the belt and road regions has amounted to US\$50 billion, resulting in 75 industrial and trade zones, and 200,000 jobs.

With its focus on infrastructure, the initiative is a model not only for developing countries, but also industrialised ones in Europe and North America, where ageing infrastructure needs replacing. It also adapts to each local, national or regional condition, situation and need. It is proving very democratic, more so than the lopsided US-led globalisation that spurred a populist, isolationist backlash across the Western world.

China has done a proper job of explaining to the West what the initiative is and extended a sincere invitation to each

country to join. Many think tank scholars and major media outlets in the West have found it potentially lucrative and expressed relatively strong support.

Yet, instead of appreciating China's efforts to both inherit the liberal agenda of globalisation and forge a new path for global development, many Western political elite, led by the US, have started a campaign to resist the initiative. From Australia to the US, and the UK to Germany, there are calls for the West to cut interactions with China to minimise or resist its so-called "sharp power". The labels typically applied to China include "authoritarian" and "predatory", citing Beijing for not upholding "freedom, democracy and individual rights", the core values of the West.

This attitude towards the initiative reveals not only a contradiction in the Western mind, but also the narrowing or even closing of minds.

Isn't it beneficial to meet the goals of forging connectivity and cooperation, as articulated in Xi's effort to enrich and expand the meaning of the "free world" by liberating humankind from geographical, financial, political and cultural barriers? The world is no longer the West versus the

rest, as we already live in a world connected by the internet. The initiative seeks to make the world more interconnected for both the West and the rest, contributing to the construction of a human community with a shared future.

Recently, the initiative has inspired and spawned a push for localisation, particularly the Indo-Pacific strategy led by the so-called "Quad" of the US, India, Japan and Australia. Some Western media view it as a rival or alternative to China's belt and road.

But I would argue that it can be part of China's initiative as long as the three Chinese principles (mutual consultation,

The anti-China smear campaign must be replaced by a discourse involving consultation and communication

joint construction and shared benefits) are observed in the Quad strategy. The belt and road was created to be an all-inclusive platform, so Beijing has no need to fear localisation as long as such strategies do not seek to contain China or disrupt its plan. It would be wise for the Quad and China to look for ways to collaborate.

Quad countries need not take an antagonistic stance towards China; the anti-China smear campaign must be replaced by a discourse involving consultation and communication. The world has experienced more than enough damaging talk, not to mention wars.

The core principles of Xi's belt and road strategy must be always applied in China's interactions with local strategies. If China is, as German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel told the Munich Security Conference in February, "the only country in the world with any sort of genuinely global, geostrategic concept", then Western leaders should cultivate a genuinely global strategy in line with China's vision, for the betterment of all humankind.

Wenshan Jia, PhD, is a professor in the School of Communication, at Chapman University (California) and a research fellow at the National Academy of Development and Strategy, Renmin University of China